

The Labor History Theme Study

A New Paradigm for Management

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In a recent article for the newsletter of the Conservation Fund, Director Roger Kennedy discussed the impact of efforts to downsize the National Park Service. "Downsizing means diminishing, and however skillfully done, it will hurt. Plans to reduce the size of agencies of government charged with caring for our common land and with the sites memorializing our common history have many virtues.... But downsizing is not just right-sizing arising from critical re-examination of government.... It is also the consequence of a national consensus that we must devote more of our current income to debt service and less to people service...."

The opportunities and challenges that "downsizing" present to National Park Service management can be seen in the new methods now employed to complete the *Labor History Theme Study*. In 1991, when Public Law 101-102, mandating the *Labor History National Historic Landmark Theme Study*, was passed, the intention and direction of the Congress was clear—the National Park Service was to complete this study through a process involving partnerships within the ranks of organized labor, historic preservation organizations and the community of academic labor historians. This mandate for cooperation with our partners has been followed throughout this study and has important implications for current management techniques used now to administer the National Historic Landmarks Survey.

For example, the National Park Service has initiated a series of partner relationships to support this study as envisioned in Public Law 101-102. In June 1991, more than 50 labor historians, State Historic Preservation Officers, local community and historic preservation leaders, and National Park Service representatives met at Lowell NHP to discuss strategies for implementing the *Labor History Theme Study*. During the three days of the conference the participants gave important guidance and suggestions concerning the direction of the study. Some of this input addressed less-documented aspects of labor history, such as women's work, agricultural work, and the contributions of minority Americans.

After funding for the study was obtained, the National Park Service selected Dr. James R. Grossman from the Newberry Library in Chicago to prepare the study. Dr. Grossman enlisted the best known and most qualified historians in the field of labor history to write the historical thematic essays that form the foundation for the study. The partnership agreement between the Newberry Library and the National Park Service is intended to serve as a model for efficient management by the Service to sustain high quality research while maintaining close adherence to national standards and guidelines through a partnership

with a leading academic institution. This approach will enable the service to produce a theme study that will illustrate the latest scholarship in the field of labor history studies with a minimum of cost and oversight.

In an attempt to invite as many organizations as possible to contribute to this study, Dr. Grossman has written to every State Historic Preservation Officer and to over a thousand additional organizations and individuals seeking suggestions for possible labor history sites. These organizations were asked to recommend sites that fit the categories of work processes, events, people, leisure establishments, labor education, workers communities, and labor organizing. In addition, the National Park Service is continuing to hold discussions with local governments and preservation organizations to encourage them to complete nominations. These sites include Matewan and Blair Mountain in West Virginia; Harmony Mills Site, Cohoes, NY; Butte-Anaconda, Butte, MT; Union Square and Amalgamated Houses in New York; Homestead Landing Site and Bost Building, Homestead, PA.; and Sloss Furnace, Birmingham, AL.

This effort is already bearing results. In the past several months information generated by the *Labor History Theme Study* has been used to comment on information on legislative proposals and acquisition of historical properties in the field of labor and social history. The most recent examples of this progress involved two labor history-related bills: the Bramwell National Historic Site bill and the Coal Heritage bill.

In accordance with the recent report by the Humanities Review Committee of the National Park Service to encourage scholarly research and peer review, the essays and National Historic Landmark nominations produced by the labor theme study will undergo a systematic and rigorous peer review by scholars within the academic and historic preservation communities. The Service, in cooperation with academic and professional organizations, will produce a study that illustrates new holistic methodologies to improve the management and implementation of history research performed by the Service.

Through the implementation of the *Labor History Theme Study*, the National Park Service affirms its commitment to creating viable partnerships with workers, labor unions, leaders from state and local communities, and preservation and academic history organizations. Working with our partners, we intend to develop strategies to assist communities with the preservation and interpretation of their locally-based but nationally-significant labor history sites and resources. The challenges are great, but rewards resulting from the recognition of the labor history heritage sites in the United States are worth the effort. In the process of completing the *Labor History Theme Study* the National Park Service can lead the way and validate our mandate to do more with less. We will produce a better product, based on scholarly research and subject to the most rigorous peer review. In cooperation with a variety of partners, the Service can become a leader in the fields of education, research, interpretation, and historic preservation relating to the labor history of our country.

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